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Opening Extract from...

Diet Rehab

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INTRODUCTION:

How I Kicked My Food Addiction . . . and How You Can, Too

I'm going to make a confession: I used to have a food addiction. And although I've since kicked the habit, every so often I want one of the foods I used to be addicted to.

Although I eat healthily, work out, meditate, and practice yoga, there are still times when I just feel blue. And sometimes—after I've called a friend, done some deep breathing, or found some other healthy alternative—I still feel desperate for a boost. It's then that I turn to my own secret treat: a big bowl of macaroni and cheese.

Now, I'm not talking about the homemade gourmet "gratin" with four types of *fromage* and a panko crumb crust. I'm talking down and dirty: the 89-cent box you get at the convenience store, the type of gluey treat that you make from elbow macaroni and that grainy orange powder. Sometimes I don't even stir all the lumps out of the sauce. In my late-night slump, those salty little nuggets are actually comforting.

I said I *used* to have a food addiction, and I meant it. I don't turn to my secret indulgence all that often, and because I enjoy it in moderation, it doesn't concern me. My mac and cheese is an occasional treat,

not a habitual form of self-medication. But I had wondered many times over the years what it was about that starchy dish that I found so restorative. We all know the term "comfort food," and many of us have felt the pull of a sugar craving, but why? How do these foods affect our feelings? Why would I turn to a carb-laden meal when I needed comfort and calm? And what's the link between emotions, food, and our difficulties with weight?

Then I became a psychotherapist who specializes in disordered eating and addictive behaviors. I began to learn more about how the mind responds to food, which gave me valuable insight into my patients and myself. I discovered that anxiety depletes our store of serotonin, a "feel-good" brain chemical that helps to soothe worries, boost self-confidence, and create a feeling of "okayness" in the world. I also learned that depression and listlessness can signal a shortage of dopamine, the energizing biochemical we all need to function during stressful situations and exciting challenges.

The basics of brain chemistry explained what was happening when I felt anxious or sad. But why did I crave mac and cheese? Why do some people crave high-fat foods while others want starchy carbs or sugary treats in times of stress or sadness?

I began to investigate the way that food and brain chemistry interact, and what I found had that "aha" quality of any discovery that seems to explain a major aspect of your life. I discovered that the carbs in my beloved treat release a quick, feel-good dose of serotonin, and that the high fat content of that neon-orange cheese boosted my dopamine levels. That soothing, calm, and energizing lift wasn't only in my imagination. I really *was* experiencing a chemical reaction, just as if I'd taken drugs to counter my low feelings.

Significantly, both prescription meds and street drugs boost serotonin and dopamine. Prozac and Zoloft, antidepressants that are effective for treating anxiety, increase the amount of serotonin available for our brains to use, while the street drug Ecstasy (MDMA) floods our brain with it, producing that over-the-top, blissed-out, "everything is fabu-

lous" sensation that we've all seen portrayed in movies and on TV. Who knew that pasta, white bread, and doughnuts were cheap, quick, and legal ways to get a mini-version of the same high?

Likewise, the antidepressant Wellbutrin lifts dopamine levels, as do nicotine, amphetamines, and cocaine. But so do bacon, potato crisps, and other high-fat foods.

I realized that when my patients talk about self-medicating with food, it isn't just a metaphor. They really are altering their brain chemistry—often in much-needed ways. It doesn't matter if their low levels of feel-good chemicals were inherited or are the result of a traumatic series of life events. They just know that they don't want to feel as bad as they're feeling.

When people would talk about food addictions, I realized that it wasn't a metaphor. Just as you can become dependent on a nicotine fix or a cocaine high, so can you grow to rely on the effects of high-carb or high-fat foods.

So that was *why* I had turned into a food addict. But *how* had it happened?

How I Became a Carb Junkie

I was fifteen years old when my family changed forever. We were on vacation in Las Vegas. One morning we were walking through the hotel lobby, headed on a daylong trek to a national park, when my ten-year-old brother, David, suddenly vomited. My mom urged me and the rest of my family to go ahead while she stayed behind to nurse my brother through whatever virus he'd picked up. He didn't seem to be in such bad shape, so we thought it was okay to leave.

This was in the days before everyone had a cell phone, and we were gone eight hours. When we returned, they weren't at the hotel. They were in the intensive care unit at a nearby hospital. There I was greeted with a shocking sight: my little brother hooked up to machines and covered in tubes, unable to speak a word. When his eyes found me, he

let out an unearthly wail I'll never forget. David had had a massive stroke right after we left.

I stared at him, unable to move. Then I heard a terrible sobbing. It was coming from my strong, unshakable grandfather as he stood beside my brother's bed.

In that moment, everything I thought about adults being infallible simply collapsed. I would never again feel safe as a child. I also knew that I had to be the most perfect, most helpful son in the world. How could my family survive if I wasn't?

Our three-day vacation turned into a three-month stay as we waited for my brother to be released from the hospital. I remember going to some Vegas mall with my mom so she could have something else to wear besides the three changes of clothes she had brought for our brief trip. Suddenly she started crying, unable to figure out what to buy. So there I was, picking out blouses and pants for my mother, terrified to think that *she* was depending on *me*.

My anxiety levels were off the charts and would stay that way for the next several years. Even now this is a part of my psychology and always will be, although I have learned to understand and manage it.

It was eight years and several surgeries before my brother, the victim of a rare brain disease, would improve. He still had only limited use of his right arm. I spent those formative years eating crisps, rice, and pasta. I learned how comforting mac and cheese could be—a whole box could actually calm me down. I lifted my spirits with five or six cans of full-sugar soda a day, and I suppressed my constant worries with a never-ending parade of snacks. My lunch at school every day was a huge bag of fries, and I popped Now and Laters as if they were pills. Sitting alone at the kitchen table while my mom took my brother to endless hospital appointments, I'd find solace in chomping through a massive bowl of ramen noodles.

To make matters worse, our family had been living a dream life in Hawaii until my parents' divorce moved us to Ohio. In Hawaii, we'd gone to nice schools and could have pretty much anything we wanted.

I fit right in, and with my half-Asian heritage I looked like most of the other kids. Then, in Ohio, no one looked like me, and my classmates called me "chink." I didn't have a clue about football or the team sports that were so important there. They didn't care that I surfed in Hawaii. All they knew was that I looked different, couldn't fit into their world, and talked funny.

Then my father had his first heart attack, leading to bypass surgery. He liked greasy foods, too, though I didn't see the connection at the time. Because of the financial burden of his medical bills and the divorce, we were forced into bankruptcy. Now we were penniless. In the grocery store, my mom said we couldn't have our favorite brand-name cereal. She did the best she could, filling us up on bags of pasta covered in cheap, generic-brand sauce.

Each anxiety fed the next, and those carbs came to be a crutch. With my hand in a bag of crisps, I self-medicated my way through my teens. I also channeled my worries into studying. Getting perfect grades and being the perfect son was the only thing I could think of to make things right at home, even though I believed nothing would ever be right again and I was powerless to fix anything.

Throughout all those years, anxiety ruled my life. Then, when I was eighteen, I moved to California to go to college, and a whole new life began. I finally felt as though I fit in. I was making great friends, talking all night with roommates, going out and socializing. In other words, my life was suddenly full of feel-good things other than food. I started to think about my future and about what I wanted and needed. I didn't feel so driven by the desire to be perfect or the constant worry over what other people thought of me. There was a new feeling in my life: that everything was going to be okay.

In a way, I had created my own early version of Diet Rehab: driving out "pitfall feelings" like anxiety and perfectionism with serotonin-boosting activities like socializing and anticipating a happy future; replacing addictive "pitfall sources" of serotonin such as soda, pasta, and crisps with healthy serotonin-boosting foods. Without even realizing it,

I had established Diet Rehab's central principle: When your life is full of serotonin- and dopamine-boosting activities, and when your thoughts trigger big doses of serotonin and dopamine and the self-esteem, optimism, and energy they bring, you will no longer crave the fix of sweets and starches.

Reveling in my new friends and plans, I stopped bingeing on the foods that had once been my lifeline. Sure, I still enjoyed fries and candy, but I wasn't interested in finishing the bag anymore; I stopped after a taste. Not only didn't I need my medication anymore; I hadn't even had to work at letting it go.

Addicted No More

These days I am twenty pounds lighter. I wake up naturally at nine each morning instead of struggling to respond to the alarm. My previously high cholesterol is now in the healthy range, and I gravitate effortlessly to healthy foods. In fact, I crave them.

I've also found a wonderful profession that allows me to help people who struggle with the same issues that I had once dealt with. I understand the addictive power of food because I've lived through it myself. I became a specialist in every kind of addiction: food, alcohol, substance abuse, and addictive behaviors. As a cognitive-behavioral therapist, I've also learned about the kinds of thoughts that set us up for addiction—the negative, unproductive, and misguided ways of viewing the world that send us rushing to *some* form of medication to stop the pain.

One of the things that strikes me most about food addiction is how easily concealed it is—from the outside world, yes, but also from ourselves. I've seen patients who look wonderful on the outside but are actually living a nightmare as they obsessively count calories and worry over every single bite. Some of my skinniest patients are my most addicted. Even the thin models, gorgeous actresses, and seemingly perfect people I have treated suffer from these addictions. Like the rest of us, however, they don't realize that their seemingly uncontrollable crav-

ings are the result of brain chemistry and the biology of addiction. Instead, like the rest of us, they blame themselves for their mysterious "weakness" and hate themselves for being unable to "do better."

My journey culminates with my experience as cohost and psychotherapist on TLC's hit show *Freaky Eaters*, where I have been able to explore food addictions at their most extreme. After years of working with patients and two seasons of *Freaky Eaters*, I've come to see that food addictions are not a problem of willpower or greed. They are a matter of brain chemistry and needing something in your life. The secret to overcoming them is not self-deprivation or self-blame—it's balancing your brain chemistry with foods and activities that boost the feel-good chemicals you need.

The Taste of Freedom

When I finally understood the nature of food addiction, I was ready to create Diet Rehab: a 28-day plan to free you from your food addictions. Diet Rehab is based on the understanding that we become addicted to food because of the chemicals we ingest: serotonin-boosting carbs and dopamine-boosting fats. So the solution is simple: Add healthier "booster" foods—those that promote a sustainable and nonaddictive release of brain chemicals—along with booster activities to increase the chemicals that our brains crave. That way, we naturally lose interest in unhealthy, addictive "pitfall" foods.

In this book I'll work with you to break the hold of food over your body, mind, and spirit. Diet Rehab will teach you to harness the power of your brain chemistry so that you'll no longer feel like a victim of your fluctuating moods and cravings. You'll restore your balance, your energy, and your well-being. You'll start thinking and acting like a person who's always at a healthy weight. And finally, you will become that person.

How do you get to this happy state? By finding healthier, more effective ways to boost your dopamine and serotonin. Instead of relying

on addictive fats and sugars, you can take advantage of healthy versions of serotonin's peace, calm, and "okayness" and of dopamine's energy, excitement, and vivacity.

In Diet Rehab, there's no calorie counting and you won't feel deprived. You can continue eating your favorite snacks—not diet versions of them but the actual foods themselves. After twenty-eight days, you'll find that you just don't want them as much, because your brain is getting natural and healthy boosts of the feel-good chemicals you crave instead of relying upon the foods you've become addicted to. You'll be freed of your food addictions because you'll be able to get all the same mood-boosting effects in healthier ways. Instead of continually self-medicating with your mac and cheese, pizza, crisps, or ice cream, you'll be able to see those foods as an occasional welcome treat.

Now here's the *really* good news: Because of Diet Rehab's unique principle of gradual detox, you will be able to make the transition easily and painlessly. That's because we don't take away *anything* until we've added lots of pleasurable and delicious brain-chemistry boosters into your diet and your life. In fact, I'm going to give you easy-to-use tools to help you along the way. My booster food-swap list offers healthier alternatives to common pitfall foods at a glance and my favorite go-to recipes for delicious, boosting dishes that include pizza and mac and cheese! By the time you start to subtract the addictive foods, you'll be totally hooked on the healthy ones.

How to Use This Book

In Part I, I'll show you how high-fat, high-sugar foods affect your brain chemistry, and how you can find alternate ways to create the same comfort, optimism, and excitement. You'll learn to identify "pitfalls"—the foods and thoughts that set up the addictive cycle—and "boosters"—the foods and behaviors that improve your brain chemistry in a healthy way.

In Part II, I'll help you figure out whether you need to replenish

serotonin or dopamine, or both. You'll also learn how to identify the pitfalls in your thinking—the negative and addictive patterns of thought that send you into an emotional downward spiral, depleting the brain chemicals that make you feel good and making you desperate for unhealthy foods that can fix your brain chemistry.

In Part III, I'll teach you how to free yourself from your "pitfall" behaviors and habits—the attitudes and thought patterns that set you up for addiction. I'll show you how to break the power of damaging triggers so that you can finally let go of compulsive eating, emotional eating, and bingeing.

In Part IV, we'll rehab your diet. The gradual detox plan I provide will teach you how to fill your plate with healthy booster foods for these crucial chemicals. At the same time, you'll learn how to fill your schedule with "booster activities"—from yoga to paintballing—that will further raise your serotonin and dopamine levels.

Creating Your Ideal Weight—and Your Ideal Life

One thing hosting TLC's *Freaky Eaters* has taught me is that we all struggle with sorrow and anxiety in different ways. For many of us, that struggle is acted out through food. But the good news is that we have the power to transform both our brain chemistry and our habits of thought. Once we understand how our brains and our minds operate, we can harness their tremendous power to attain our ideal weight, stay there permanently, and create our lives as we would have them.

As a cognitive-behavioral therapist, I'm the person who helps you get to the place you know you want to be. If you're like my other patients, you've already been on at least one diet or maybe several. You're probably tired of them not working—and yet you don't want to give up on yourself and your vision of how good you could look and how great you could feel.

I'm here to tell you that you don't have to. With an understanding

of your own brain chemistry and the practice of gradual detox, you can fill your life with so much natural peace, joy, and excitement that you'll never have to self-medicate with food again. Food will return to its rightful place in your life—as a source of nourishment and enjoyment—and your focus will shift to creating and enjoying exactly the life you want.

I know you can get there. In fact, I promise you that you can. So let's get started!

With love and kindness,

Dr Mike

Exceptions

There are several conditions that Diet Rehab is not intended to address, and many circumstances in which it should be used only under a physician's or psychotherapist's supervision. Please see Appendix B for more details.